

Doncaster Plant, Railways and Locomotive Works

Overview of a talk by Hugh Parkin
at the D&DFHS Monthly Meeting on 26 November 2008

Hugh Parkin and his son worked at the Plant, just like his father, grandfather and great-grandfather before him. These five generations of the Parkin family gave 186 years of service between them. When most of the works wound down, Hugh found a number of ledgers in a skip containing employment records of some of the men who worked there. He obtained permission to retrieve them and they are now safely deposited at the Doncaster Archives. The contents of some of these ledgers have been transcribed by volunteers of the D&DFHS and are available on CD, which is now for sale.

Hugh took his audience on a fascinating journey describing how the Plant works came to Doncaster and the main changes and events that took place through to its gradual decline.

The Great Northern Railway, Locomotive and Carriage Building Works were established in Doncaster in the height of the Industrial Revolution. Their main works were originally in Boston, Lincolnshire but the company decided to relocate to Doncaster because they recognised the town's excellent communication links and the availability of coal in the area. A peal of bells from St George's Church heralded the news of what was to be a great coup for the town. (This was the "old" St George's church which subsequently burned down and was rebuilt around 1858)

As early as 1847, the company had started purchasing land in the Hexthorpe area. This was an agricultural area with orchards and market gardens, chosen for its proximity to the railway and the river. Limestone was brought by river from Cadeby to provide footings for the buildings. The first blacksmiths arrived in 1853 to work in the newly constructed building that is still being used today. Eventually, an eleven acre site was filled with workshops and working areas, behind what is now Dennison House and was colloquially known as Number 8 Platform.

The original labour force for the Plant relocated from the Boston and Peterborough works. These were not small numbers as 700 working men made the move, bringing about 500 women and 1026 children with them. Doncaster expanded to accommodate them and the Chairman of the company persuaded the shareholders to contribute towards the building of St James's Church. A school (next to St James's Church) and an extensive housing programme was undertaken to provide accommodation for the workforce, who were joined by local people as their numbers gradually rose to about 1200.

Hugh talked about some of the famous engineers who had their designs constructed at the Plant. He started with Sturrock, who designed engines, and explained how the site expanded as they undertook carriage work. This was very labour intensive, providing work for much of the town's population. In the height of its production, there were 7000 people employed at the Plant. The Crimsal Shops alone cost £294,000 to build in 1901.

In 1890 the Erecting Shop was added where locomotives were built. Hugh showed lots of photographs of the site, inside the workshops and offices, plus trains at various stages of construction. He gave vivid descriptions of the working conditions such as describing the sound of men knocking out connecting rods from blocks of solid steel with the thump of the hammer reverberating throughout the site. Nigel Gresley (later Sir Nigel) designed the Flying Scotsman and the Mallard – famous now the world over. The Mallard did the famous run on 3 July 1928 when it reached a speed of 126 mph (or 125.92 mph according to a member of

the audience). The Plant also constructed diesel and electric engines, after the original steam engines.

Women joined the workforce during both world wars when the Plant diversified to munitions production and other necessities for the war effort. The last steam locomotive was completed in Doncaster in 1957, but repair work continued to be undertaken. Although the site is no longer operating on the same scale, 750 people are still working there for a number of companies.

*Karen Walker, Editor
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